



*New Jersey Highlands Council
100 North Road – Route 513
Chester, New Jersey 07930
www.highlands.state.nj.us
P:908-879-6737 F:908-879-4205*

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Contact- Liz Maziarz (908) 879-6737

Highlands Council Marks First Anniversary of Legislation

Clinton, NJ- The Highlands Council today marked the one year anniversary of the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act in a ceremony at the Clinton Falls Dam on the Raritan River.

“The signing of the Highlands Act one year ago was a culmination of years of effort from many groups and individuals,” said Senator Bob Smith (D-17), who sponsored the Act in the Senate last year. “I am proud to have been a part of one of the most significant environmental protection measures in decades, which is already protecting the source of drinking water for 4 million New Jerseyans.”

Assembly sponsor John McKeon (D-27) said, “During this one year anniversary, I want to thank and commend all parties involved in our efforts to pass the most important piece of environmental legislation in a generation.”

The Highlands Council, a 14 member body appointed by the Governor in the fall of 2004, is charged with carrying out the Act’s mandate of creating a Regional Master Plan for the Highlands region by June 2006.

“One year ago, the Governor and legislature created a land use planning process for the Highlands that is, at once, innovative and visionary, yet practical and smart,” said Highlands Council Chairman John Weingart.

“The Council is now well underway to implement the Act,” continued Weingart, “and we are very encouraged by the valuable advice and assistance we are receiving from local officials and other residents from throughout the Highlands region.”

"In the first year of this landmark law, the Legislature's vision has been codified in tough rules to protect Highlands resources from encroaching development," said DEP Commissioner Bradley M. Campbell. "Chairman Weingart and the Council have been true partners in the effort to ensure that our precious water resources and threatened and endangered species habitat remain untouched for the benefit of future generations."

The Act contains new environmental standards, which went into effect immediately upon signing, that limit development in the environmentally sensitive Highlands Preservation Area.

"The Highlands Act has given the communities in the region, particularly those in the Preservation Area, room to breathe and time to plan," said Highlands Coalition Executive Director Bill O'Hearn. "Instead of reacting to development pressure, planning boards can actually take time to plan the future of their towns."

"I would like to thank the members and staff of the Highlands Council, who are doing a terrific job," added Senator Smith. "It will be their efforts going forward in the implementation of the Highlands Act that will take another large step forward in protecting the natural resources of the New Jersey Highlands for generations to come."

Assemblyman McKeon concluded, "This law represents making good on a once in a lifetime chance to safeguard the source of clean drinking water for half of New Jersey's residents and preserve a dwindling habitat for wildlife. Our work is not done, however. We must continue to provide the necessary resources to see that we seize on a narrowing window of opportunity to protect one of the State's most important and environmentally sensitive regions."

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